

# Troubleshooting: Dealing with Common Writing Problems

by April Kelley

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## IDEAS

*Problem: There is not enough information; this paper doesn't say anything.*

### Strategies:

1. **Share students' own voices.** When students get to hear the voices of their peers they begin to open up and realize that they too have something to say.
2. **Go beyond stories.** Some students do not feel comfortable as storytellers. We need to read all kinds of genre to help prompt them.
3. **Make it fun.** Show students how to put life into writing by making use of professional writers' proven skills. Identify techniques that other writers use, describe it, and name it (if it doesn't already have a name). Challenge your students to borrow those techniques and incorporate them into their writing. Some examples include: sales techniques, creating want ads or posters, writing parody, doing job interviews and talk shows, personification, role playing, using sound words, etc.
4. **Take ten.** Can't get started? Gather your notes or ideas about a prompt from which you will draw your information. Write the very best lead you can, set a timer for 10 min., and within that time write the most complete report/story you can (beginning to end). BUT, as you do this, write on every other line. After you're finished, go back and use questions to identify gaps where you will need to expand your thinking and add detail. At least you have a start now!
5. **Leave some writing unfinished at the end of the day.** Having trouble getting started or finishing your writing the next day? Try this little trick. Stop in the middle of a paragraph, or even in the middle of a line. Sometimes it's easier to start by finishing a line or paragraph rather than starting a new one from scratch.
6. **Draw.** Sometimes starting with a sketch or doodling sparks an idea for writers of all ages.

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some ideas taken from "Creating Writers" by Vicki Spandel and  
"Beginning Writing: Using the 6-trait Writing Framework" by Lori Jamison Rog

*Problem: There's too much information. Help! It's huge.*

**Strategies:**

1. ***Cut the copy in half.*** Ask a writer to pretend that they're writing for a newspaper and can only fill so many inches on the page. Challenge them to "cut the copy in half" without losing the content.

2. ***Whittle big topics down by size.*** Wordy, rambling writing is often a result of a topic that's too big to get hold of. Skinny down the topic. For example:

Baseball (too big)

How to pitch (better - but not there yet)

How to pitch against the best hitter in the league (almost small enough)

How to pitch under pressure: a 3-2 count and a cramp in your back (That's It!)

*Problem: It's too fuzzy and loosely focused. Filler outweighs quality detail.*

**Strategies:**

1. ***Teach different prewriting strategies.*** Webbing doesn't work for all students. Teach the students various prewriting strategies so they may choose the strategy that works best for them. Some prewriting strategies include:

- Talking it through -tell story twice before writing it.
- Five-Finger Planner - trace hand, write topic in palm, details on fingers
- Story boards
- Lists
- Lists of potential reader's questions
- Start with the 1st draft as a prewrite
- Rehearsing - drawing a picture or life map
- Interviewing
- Reading
- Viewing a film
- Browsing the internet
- Looking out the window
- Talk to yourself
- Role-play
- Look at pictures (photo albums)

2. ***Weed out filler.*** Use highlighters or a colored pen (gel pen) to highlight important details and cross out details that aren't interesting or don't relate to the topic.

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